



INSIGHTS INTO READING COMPREHENSION IN ENGLISH AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS OF KERALA

Education

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ABSTRACT

English skills are turning definitive in determining the individual career prospects and economic progress of any individual in today's world. In this context, the study tries to explore reading comprehension in English of primary school students in Kerala, India. The sample for the survey comprised 859 students of Standard VII studying the State syllabus from 12 schools of Kottayam district giving due representation to gender and medium of instruction. The Test of Reading Comprehension in English prepared and standardised by Jaise & Joseph (2014) was used for the study. The study showed low levels of reading comprehension in English for the total sample. Further extreme variations were found to exist among the subsamples. While gender subsamples demonstrated similar performance in reading comprehension in English, subsamples with regard to medium of instruction showed marked differences. The study calls for fresh efforts to enhance reading comprehension in English among primary school students.

KEYWORDS

Reading Comprehension In English, Primary School Students, Gender, Medium Of Instruction, Kerala

INTRODUCTION

Defining literacy has become an increasingly complex task with the progress of the information age with its myriad digital forms. However, language literacy still continues to form the basic requirement for all other higher forms of literacy. The Global Monitoring Report by UNESCO titled 'Literacy for Life' (2005, p. 30) purports literacy to be "a context-based continuum of reading, writing and numeric skills acquired and developed through the process of learning and application in schools and in other settings appropriate to youth and adults".

Basic literacy is still a right denied to a large proportion of the world's population, especially the poor, women and marginalized groups. It exposes them to a serious threat of exclusion from employment and citizenship as literacy generally includes the foundational skills for the educational success of an individual.

The 2011 census declared 26% of Indian population to be illiterate. As regards knowledge and skills in English language, this rate will surely go higher. India will be the youngest nation in the world (with a median age of 29 years) by 2020. ("India's Youth Challenge", 2017) As the potential largest supplier of young skilled labour, India cannot ignore equipping its youth with the essential communication skills in the most influential world language.

NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE

Assessments of basic English in rural India were carried out in 2007, 2009, 2012, 2014 and 2016 named Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) which is the largest citizen-led survey in India. As per their survey in 2016, there is a marked decline in reading abilities in the upper primary grades. In 2009, 60.2% of children in Std VIII demonstrated reading skills in English; in 2014, this figure was 46.7% and in 2016 this figure further declined to 45.2%.

Reading deficits in early grades when not diagnosed and intervened develop into serious reading problems leading to total academic failure for a child. "To detect and diagnose the incipient reading problems, then, is the primary responsibility of the teacher. Prevention of reading difficulties should begin before the child begins formal reading instruction and continue throughout his entire school career. Prevention is best brought about by diagnosis of and constant alertness to any incipient or existing difficulty" (Dechant, 1968, p. 451). In this scenario the present study was undertaken, to explore reading comprehension in English of primary school students studying State Syllabus in Kerala.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study were

1. to explore reading comprehension in English of primary school students.

2. to compare reading comprehension in English of primary school students with respect to the subsamples of gender (boys/girls) and medium of instruction (English/Malayalam).

HYPOTHESES

The hypotheses formulated for the study were

1. Primary school students have low levels of reading comprehension in English.
2. There is significant difference in reading comprehension in English of primary school students with regard to their subsamples of gender (boys/girls) and medium of instruction (English/Malayalam).

METHODOLOGY

The survey method was adopted for exploring and comparing reading comprehension in English among primary school students.

Population and Sample

The population of the survey consisted of primary school students of Kerala following the State syllabus. Stratified random sampling technique was applied to gather data for the survey giving due representation to gender and medium of instruction. The sample comprised 859 students (Boys: 434, Girls: 425; English Medium Students: 543, Malayalam Medium Students: 316) of Standard VII studying the State syllabus from 12 schools of Kottayam district.

RESEARCH TOOL UTILISED

The Test of Reading Comprehension in English prepared and standardised by Jaise & Joseph (2014) was used for the study. The Test consists of five passages, with five questions each (a total of 25 questions). A Scoring Key with one definite answer for each question was also framed. Each correct response gets 'one score' and an incorrect response gets a 'zero score'. The maximum score and minimum score on the test are 25 and 0 respectively. Separate Response Sheets are provided. The Test maintains objectivity, ensures ease of assessment and avoids the element of guessing.

Analysis and Results

The scores on the Test of Reading Comprehension in English were analysed with regard to the total sample and subsamples based on gender and medium of instruction.

Reading Comprehension Scores in English of the Total Sample and Subsamples

The reading comprehension scores in English were tabulated and their mean, median, standard deviation, quartile deviation, skewness and kurtosis were calculated for the total sample and for the subsamples.

The details are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Measures of Central Tendency, Dispersion, Skewness and Kurtosis of Reading Comprehension Scores in English of the Total Sample and Subsamples

Sample	Groups	N	AM	Mdn	SD	Q	Sk	Ku
Total		859	12.72	12.00	5.17	3.5	0.42	-0.45
Gender	Boys	434	12.39	11.00	5.25	4.0	0.53	-0.52
	Girls	425	13.06	12.00	5.08	4.0	0.32	-0.30
Medium of Instruction	English	543	14.95	15.00	4.87	4.0	0.08	-0.47
	Malayalam	316	8.89	9.00	2.97	2.0	0.33	0.58

Table 1 clearly shows that the arithmetic mean of the total sample and subsamples cluster around 50% of the maximum score (total sample: 12.72; boys: 12.39; girls: 13.06; English medium: 14.95) except for that of the Malayalam medium students (8.89). This implies that most of the students have only an average level of reading comprehension in English.

The standard deviation of the scores of the total sample and the subsamples (total sample: 5.17; boys: 5.25; girls: 5.08; English medium: 4.87) indicate the prevalence of individual differences within the groups. However, the standard deviation of Malayalam medium students was 2.97, which along with the low mean score indicates an extremely low level of reading comprehension in English of that subsample.

The distributions of the scores for all subsamples were positively skewed (total sample: 0.42; boys: 0.53; girls: 0.32; English medium: 0.08; Malayalam medium: 0.33) which implies that all the subsamples have a low level of reading comprehension in English.

The kurtosis of the Malayalam medium subsample (0.58) was higher than the normal value of 0.263, which means that the distribution of the scores was platykurtic. The kurtoses of all other groups (total sample: -0.45; boys: -0.52; girls: -0.30; English medium: -0.47) were less than the normal value, therefore the distributions were leptokurtic.

Thus by analysing the values of measures of central tendency and measures of dispersion of reading comprehension scores in English, it can be inferred that the level of reading comprehension in English of the total sample and subsamples was generally low.

The mean reading comprehension scores in English of the total sample and subsamples are graphically represented in Figure 1.

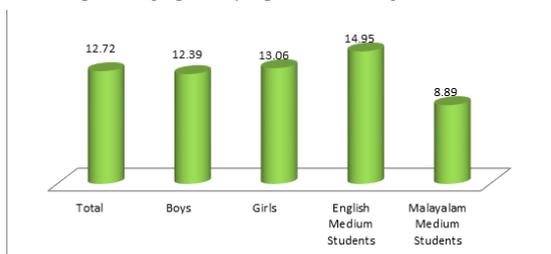


Figure 1 Mean Scores of Reading Comprehension in English of the Total Sample and Subsamples

Comparison of Reading Comprehension Scores in English of the Subsamples

The arithmetic means and standard deviations of the scores of reading comprehension in English of subsamples based on gender and medium of instruction were subjected to the test of significance of difference of means. The consolidated results are given in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Results of Test of Significance of Difference between Means of Reading Comprehension Scores in English of the Subsamples

Components	Groups	N	AM	SD	't' value	p
Gender	Boys	434	12.39	5.25	1.90	p>0.01*
	Girls	425	13.06	5.08		
Medium of Instruction	English	543	14.95	4.87	22.67	p<0.01**
	Malayalam	316	8.89	2.97		
Results: *'t' value is not significant : ** 't' value is significant						

From Table D, for df 857, $t_{0.05} = 1.96$, $t_{0.01} = 2.58$

From Table 2, it can be seen that the mean scores of reading comprehension in English of boys (m = 12.39) and girls (m = 13.06) do not differ significantly even at 0.05 level ('t' = 1.90). From Table 2, it can also be seen that the mean reading comprehension scores in English of English medium students (m=14.95) and Malayalam medium students (m= 8.89) differ significantly at 0.01 level ('t' = 22.67). We can thus infer that while reading comprehension scores in English of primary school boys and girls are similar, primary school English medium students excel Malayalam medium students in their reading comprehension in English.

Tenability of Hypotheses

The hypotheses formulated for the study were tested and their tenability is stated below.

Hypothesis I

Primary school students have low levels of reading comprehension in English.

The findings show low levels of reading comprehension in English, among primary school students in Kerala. Thus Hypothesis I is accepted.

Hypothesis II

There is significant difference in reading comprehension in English of primary school students with regard to their subsamples of gender (boys/girls), and medium of instruction (English/Malayalam).

The findings show that reading comprehension in English of primary school students do not differ significantly for the subsamples of gender; whereas reading comprehension in English of primary school students differ significantly for the subsamples of medium of instruction. Thus Hypothesis II is partly accepted.

Implications of the Study

The results point to the low levels of reading comprehension in English in general, among primary school students in Kerala calling forth committed efforts towards improving this situation.

Further, large disparities are found to exist among the subsamples. While gender subsamples demonstrated similar performance in reading comprehension in English, subsamples with regard to medium of instruction showed marked discrepancies. The fact that primary school students having Malayalam as their medium of English instruction when compared to their counterparts are far behind in their reading comprehension in English is a disturbing finding for educators. The findings of Paige, Spagnoli, & Wood (2013) support the results of this section.

The findings of the study favour diagnosis and remediation among young students. Early detection of reading deficits in English is the sure way to stop them from snowballing into language disabilities.

The study necessitates further investigations with larger sample sizes involving students studying different syllabi across various districts in Kerala. Collating information on existing practices of diagnosis and remediation of reading problems among primary school students, can throw light on the large gap in reading diagnosis and remediation existent in our schools. Exploring the attitude and awareness among school teachers regarding the need for diagnosis and remediation in reading and providing training to language teachers will also prove helpful in meeting the challenge.

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